Pointy Helmets and Buckteeth:
Naming in Sign Language – an Exploration

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Abstract

Proper names exist in all cultures and carry a special meaning for the name bearers and name givers. Within the Deaf community, names given can be for official or everyday usage as well as restricted to use only within the family. Special sign names are given to children, people close to the family as well as 'visitors' to the culture. This seems to aid socialization within the community and impact on the name bearer's identity.

Three rules for creating name signs can be distinguished: arbitrary, descriptive and mixed. I am discussing whether this affects a multi-lingual or mono-lingual use of the signs in terms of internal and/or external access to the names stock. Pragmatic functions of name sign use are highlighted and questions like the existence of a dominant type raised.

The paper considers the formation and use of proper names in British Sign Language (BSL). References to 'neighbouring' languages like English and American Sign Language (ASL) are made. I am working with a small set of data from a class of sign language 'visitors', native speaking tutors and beyond in a British context.

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1. Introduction

The study explores the formation and use for proper names and peer given names in British Sign Language (BSL) with reference to neighbouring languages like spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL). The paper draws on small-scale sociolinguistic observations of BSL classes containing both hearing and hearing impaired learners. The students became 'visitors' in the land of native (BSL) signing tutors. As a student of BSL the more sessions I attended the more fascinated I became by the interactions of the Deaf community and people on the fringe, like myself, who opened the door slightly to gain insight into a totally new culture of name giving and sharing. From a brief introduction to the history and development of BSL, this paper will proceed to provide some points of comparison with other languages and culminate in the consideration of structure of 'insider peer given' sign names and the motivation for name giving.

I, the cultural outsider, set out to undertake a review of the existing literature on Sign Language (SL). When I finally came across an extremely useful bibliography administered by the University of Hamburg (International Bibliography of Sign Language, 1993), I was honestly surprised by the wealth of existing research, surveys and studies into sign language naming. Studies have been carried out in Sweden, the USA, Belgium, Greece and as far afield as China, New Zealand, Palestine, not to forget the study about Québec Deaf Culture. Leading researchers are Supalla (Sam and Ted), Klima and Bellugi, Lucas, Hedberg, Meadow, Mindess, Deuchar and Yau and He. The study of sign language is marked by considerable growth within the field of sociolinguistics in recent years which means it is open to general sociolinguistic enquiry; that is where my interests lie.

As Sutton-Spence and Woll (2006: 234) note, ironically, there has not been any published work on names in BSL. I would like to contribute a small study within the realms of British Sign Language in a particular social setting.

2. Sign Language

There are certain myths that exist about sign languages which e.g., Woll and Lawson (1987) set out to disprove successfully:

- people tend to think that there is one universal sign language
- sign language might be derived from visual pictures
- signs are only gestures
- SL is parasitic on English
- and last but not least that sign language has no grammar of worth.

All of these points have been intensely discussed and dispelled in the last 20–30 years of research. Until the 1970s human language was defined and characterized by the presence of voice. We have come a long way, however, since the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan, 1880, which adopted a resolution along the lines of 'the convention considers the incontestable superiority of speech over sign…' (in Fullwood and Williams, 2000: 5).

Only decades ago BSL was still, in the eyes of many, a not fully developed language, a restricted language with deficits. People thought it was merely gestures and iconic representations. It has been recognized as a full-fledged autonomous linguistic system shared by communities of users, a visual-gestural language which developed independently of the language of the hearing population around it. However, official ratification of BSL as a recognized language did not occur until 2003 (RNID, 2007, online). The RNID lists BSL as the preferred language of up to 70,000 people in the UK with an array of regional varieties.

Sign language can be described syntactically and semantically with added lip patterns and fingerspellings and is, according to Woodward (1978), Fullwood and Williams (2000) and others structurally closer to Pidgin and Creole than other types of natural language with a fully developed grammar. Nowadays we know SL can be like any other language described under the influence of political and economic, social and ideological conditions – multilingualism, language variation, choice and shift, language planning, policy and ecology can be scrutinized. It is characterized by communities of practice.

As mentioned before, in the beginning of SL research, Woodward (1978: 122) observed that 'unfortunately … it ha[d] been concentrated almost exclusively on one language, American Sign Language'. In investigations of ASL 'it has become very clear that any feature which is characteristically found in spoken languages has a counterpart in sign language' according to Yule (1996: 209). Woodward (1978: 132) described the situation of BSL 30 years ago as strongly influenced by spoken English, more even than ASL. He states 'where there is no native sign term, a fingerspelled word or initialized sign (an abbreviation of a fingerspelled word) is used and shows a clear influence from the outside spoken world'. Crystal (1991: 225) refers to fingerspelling as dactylology, best thought of as an auxiliary signing system which other sources would agree on. A clear distinction between ASL and BSL is that ASL uses a one-handed alphabet, where BSL uses two hands. However, most signs are created with two hands in both languages.

Fullwood and Williams (2000: 11) talk about the hybridization at both levels of the lexis and syntax in BSL and the proximity to English comparable to the situation of the language of English Gypsies. They even go so far as to state that (ibid: 8) 'although contact with English has undoubtedly led to the de-naturalization of sign, it has also enriched it, especially in the area of lexis.'

Of interest for onomastic scholars is the observation that in SL personal name signs (sign names, SN, from hereon) are not used to *address* a person as is the case in spoken languages but only to *refer* to them. BSL – regarding status or formality – does not make use of titles such as Mr., Mrs., Dr. or Rev. Interestingly, surnames are not of importance in the Deaf community either. One might know a person's official first and sign name only. If addressed one has to use waving hands or tapping on shoulders (if agreed) or similar as a convention. SN are not obligatory, the person's official English first name can be used. Sutton-Spence and Woll (2006: 238) explain that in Britain often 'there is no introduction by name, but a brief background description is given for context (e.g. 'a friend from work' or 'Emma's mother'). Later, in their absence, they may be referred to as 'you know, the one from Liverpool' or 'with bright, red lipstick' and so on. Only later, if the person remained in contact with the Deaf community, would an English name be provided.' A further step in this process would be the assigning of a sign name.

3. Social aspects

Sign language is unique in the sense that only up to 10% of children acquire it from their parents; where does it leave the other 90% who learn it in schools or from peers later in life?

This brings me to the social aspects of SL in general and intra- and intercultural interactions in specific. Supalla (1992: xiii) argues that names and naming are essential for the socialization of a person in a community. This also seems to apply to communities of signers. Meadow (1980) uses the term 'linguistic socialization' to refer to both the acquisition of SL and entry into the Deaf community. Gumperz' concept of a speech community is drawn on by Deuchar (1984: 27) as the deaf sign language community which in Britain refers to users of BSL. Gumperz' definition can thus be transferred to BSL as: 'any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage.'

In social psychology a distinction is made between in- and out-groups of people. Deaux (1996, cited in Franzoi, 2003: 72) writes that we not only categorize ourselves as members of certain groups, others are also categorized by us as either members of the same group or as members of other groups. An in-group is a group to which we belong and which forms part of our social identity; an out-group then is a group with which we do not share membership. A clear dichotomy there – however, I like to use the terms insider/outsider as comparison. This allows me to add subcategories like 'insider out'/ 'on the fringe', 'outsider in', etc. A deaf person who grew up with hearing parents and whose first language was English rather than BSL will be seen in a different light within the Deaf community.

Woodward (1978: 134) looked into the context dependency of SL in his study on kinship lexicalization 30 years ago. He argued that 'the sociolinguistic situation presents no need for the maintenance of distinctions in sign language between insiders and outsiders' – a statement which I hope to disprove.

Within SL communities there are distinctions like 'Deaf with a capital D' and 'deaf with a small d' again attributed to Woodward who coined it in his 1972 article 'Implications for sociolinguistic research among the Deaf'. This differentiation was re-affirmed for me in a deaf awareness class recently. The capital D represents the inner circle of the Deaf community, people born into it or having a close relationship to the local Deaf club. Sutton-Spence and Woll (2006: 230) refer to D/d as Deaf = cultural deafness and d = audiological deafness. Lucas (2001: 1) similarly uses lower case d as an adjective referring to hearing loss and upper case D referring to 'social collectivities and attitudes arising from interactions among people with hearing loss'. Another way of looking at it is to distinguish between the 'medical and social model of disability' but that would take us beyond our current discussion.

Mindess (as recent as 2006) highlights that in order to gain an intracultural point of view a cultural framework is needed. In the past the insider/outsider distinction was simply a 'deaf vs. hearing' dichotomy but is developing in the direction of 'signers vs. non-signers'. Mindess (2006: 80) also offers the following poignant quote on accessibility:

> 'It is as if Deaf people live in a castle surrounded by a communication moat which protects them yet makes it difficult to interact with the majority of people in their land. They can see the other people in their kingdom and exchange a few gestures with them but cannot engage in a deep exchange of thoughts and feelings. If someone stands outside the moat, however, showing an interest in learning sign language, the draw bridge is let down and the new signers are welcomed to the castle (although perhaps only to its public rooms, its inner chambers being reserved for longtime residents).'

This leads me to my name sign samples.

4. Data analysis

William Stokoe (1976, cited in Deuchar, 1984) developed a system of explaining the elements of signs. He came up with a basic tripartite system which he subsequently developed further and devised written transcription symbols for.

Stokoe's basic elements for describing a sign were:

> Tab = *tabula, position*
> Dez = *designator, for configuration or what acts?*
> Sig = *signification, for motion and action*

(For a full overview of Dez symbols see Kyle, J. G. and Woll, B., 97–104.)

I am, however, referring to the components of handshape, orientation, location and movement as found in a number of sign language dictionaries and reference books (see Brien, 1992, for BSL). Yule (1996) supports this: producing linguistic forms signers use four key aspects of visual information: shape, orientation, location and movement. This seems a slight extension to the Stokoe system.

In Table1, one can see the component table describing the 18 samples I collected used as an initial piece of information on formation of SN.

Table 1. Component table [non-manual features excluded]

No	Sign Name	Handshape	Location	Orientation	Movement
1	German	Pointed finger	Top of forehead	Upwards, facing	Towards head
2	AK	Full hand L – index R	Neutral space	Hands facing	Letter A + K
3	Dr	Full hand L + thumb	Neutral space	Hands facing	Letters D + R
4	JC	Full hand L – index R, thumb	Neutral space	Hands facing	Letters J + C
5	Happy	Both hands open	Neutral space	Hands together	Right hand rotates down left after contact
6	Late	Full hand L + fist & index	Neutral space	Facing R + in contact on L	Right index slides down on full L
7	'Fag'	Open fist + index and middle finger outstretched	Near mouth	Towards body	Two fingers – forwards & back
8	Kneel	Open fist + 2 fingers bent	Neutral space	Sideways	Index and middle finger 'kneel'
9	Pink	Fist + index	Lower lip	Towards body	Index flicks lip
10	Red	Fist + index	Lower lip	Towards body	Index R moves over lower lip L to R
11	Hamster	Fist L + full cupped hand R	Neutral space	Downwards	R sliding over L fist
12	Birmingham (variation)	C hand	Neutral space	L, away	Closed/ open C, across body
13	Loo	Clenched hand	R of head	Towards head	Clenched fist moves down
14	Nosey	Fist + index	Middle of face	Towards face	Index touches side of nose
15	Sly	Fist + outstretched thumb	Right cheek	Towards centre	Down on right cheek
16	French	Half-open fist	Right of mouth	Towards mouth	Thumb & index together, twist wrist near mouth
17	Remote control	Fist	Neutral space	Forward	Zapping with thumb
18	Hair bun	Clawed open fist	Top of head	Downwards	Open fist to top of head

Neutral space = in front of body

However, rather than merely describing how the SNs were formed I would like to consider the motivation for the usage of the signs, in particular how they are used and why.

Sam Supalla (1990, 1992) uses arbitrary name signs (ANSes) and descriptive name signs (DNSes) in his categorization of the ASL system. Supalla offers detailed analysis of the phonological structure of name signs. He contrasts descriptive – denoting individual's personal appearance, behaviour, or personality with arbitrary – 'which consists only of the initial letters of the first or last name [of a person] with movement in a specific location.' (His own sign is representing the letter 'S' near the mouth + movement). Dubuisson and Desrosiers equally use descriptive and arbitrary group allocation for their Canadian data (1994: 253).

Supalla researched the ASL system from the point of view of a cultural insider, as a deaf person born to deaf parents, with his own sign bestowed by his brother, clearly the strongest position one can have. His conclusion is that the ANS system is the dominant and truly native system in ASL. He even describes the DNS as the weaker system and is highly suspicious of what he calls non-traditional mixed name signs. He comments: 'Unfortunately, the increase in such name signs coincides with the dramatic increase in hearing people learning ASL as a second/ foreign language' (1992: 10). Everyone can judge for oneself the tone of this statement. In a later Greek study, however, by Kourbetis & Hoffmeister (2002: 36) we can identify a clearly different tenor: 'In Greece, large numbers of students have been attending classes in GSL as a second language taught by Deaf teachers; the need for name signs has correspondingly increased.'

Contrary to the above situation in ASL, in BSL we can see, even with a small sample like ours, a different development – a preference for DNSes with ANSes allocated in much smaller numbers and the occurrence of a third mixed group. This I attribute to the socio-cultural phenomenon of a speech community opening its doors to newcomers, most of whom would be second language learners. This can be defined as contact onomastics with a dominant rule: the name giver has to be an insider from the BSL community, a BSL native speaker.

Kalverkämper states (1997: 44) 'Die Kontaktonomastik steht [...] als solche der Interaktionsforschung nahe, und zwar mit besonderer Sicht, speziell die Leistung von Eigennamen bei der Begegnung kommunizierender Menschen zu untersuchen'. He defines contact phenomena as meta-linguistic, meta-proprial and in the light of onomastic attention.

A brief analysis of the data in table 1 (which was collected in three British locations: Birmingham, Leicester and London) is revealing that contrary to ASL data, we find 13 out of 18 samples as DNSes. Two of these are true ANSes and three are of mixed nature. But the intriguing point is that dissimilar to American research, it is not the outsiders who are given MNSes or bring in MNSes or coin them but native-speakers with the main rule prevailing – the name giver is an insider of the community.

In my opinion DNSes have a more surface character in origin; MNSes are more substantial, playful and inventive. One has to know the person well enough in order to bestow a name which looks like bearing a negative connotation (e.g. in the example of 'Loo'; table 1, No 13). Kohlheim, R. (1997: 63) referring to name givers in the context of her study on occupational names, which are representatives of DNSes, states: 'Der Namengeber zielte nicht auf eine sachliche, wertneutrale Angabe […], sondern auf eine emotional gefärbte (etwas herablassende, scherzhafte, spöttische, tadelnde) Kennzeichnung der betreffenden Person.' I can fully agree with this in our BSL context.

Bienvenu (1989: 98) once wrote 'The Deaf always had five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and a sense of humor'. Often people who are not members of the culture will respond negatively to this kind of humor. This is a common misunderstanding with outsiders. Deaf people are not insulting the individual whom they describe; they rather are delighting in the precision of the language to accurately convey these details. And, Bienvenu carries on, they 'translate their views of the world into humor' (ibid: 100).

This is born out by my experience where sign language is often not 'politically correct' (as e.g., in the example of 'German', Table 1, No 1). Maybe it has to be more 'sturdy' because of the absence of an audio channel of communication? This, of course, leaves room for interpretation.

Guests and fringe persons to the BSL community are often given less 'substantial', i.e. more superficial, sign names. They might only be playing along the margins for a short while anyway and never show a bigger interest in the culture than a one-year taster course. Woodward (1978: 251) found that the attribution of a SN does not generally occur until the point when a Deaf person is better acquainted with the hearing person.

Sutton-Spence and Woll (2006: 236) interpret the SN I was first given (table 1, No 1) as a name sign being based upon personal information. 'For example, if a person comes from another country, but is staying in Britain for a while, they may be given the name of their home country.' Not much knowledge and observation about my personality is necessary here. Yau & He (1990: 247) observed that 'The choice of personal features, too, is influenced by the social environment of this deaf microcosm.'

However, the least substantial names in BSL seem to be the ANSes (again, contrasting Supalla), followed by the DNSes which implies some more intimate knowledge about someone's habits, appearance, personality or else (see the examples of 'happy', 'late', 'nosey', 'fag' [that is BE for cigarette!] and 'hamster' in table 1). An ANS might be bestowed out of respect, with a deaf student calling me 'AK' (No 2), my initials for my first name after all. The oldest member of my Birmingham group was referred to as simply 'JC' and not 'old face' or 'crooked fingers' which would be cruel and impolite but not far from the truth for Mr. 'Buckteeth' for instance (one of Supalla's DNS examples).

Regarding MNSes, Supalla (1992: 12) writes one should take note that there are many instances of 'playing with name signs' which he attributes to a motivation to create humour within ASL. Neil's and Lou's names (the true insiders in my sample) clearly represent this side of BSL as well. They are what we call cross linguistic approximations. Dubuisson and Desrosiers (1994) offer an example of pragmatic association as in Pilote (Surname) – 'avion' (SN). My third MSN example of Mr Sly (= insider, surname; table 1, No 15) – 'sly', on the surface a DNS, should fall under the same category. But I would argue that it might be better called a loan association (from loan translation from English).

Loan translations from person's spoken language name also occur, e. g. with first names like Hope, also partial approximate translation of written form or spoken component, e.g. Gloria = glory. Famous (hearing) people normally get sign names when they come to prominence; their names are being used in conversations. Some, e.g., J.F. Kennedy, only received the name after his death (Dubuisson and Desrosiers, 1994). Mindess (1990: 15) brings us back to the social aspect stating that Deaf people invented names for hearing people indicating that they are outsiders.

Last but not least the question of whether a sign name can be changed if it is deemed unsuitable. A sign name may change due to physical, behavioural or intellectual changes (circumstantial?) in a person's life according to some research. This is substantiated, e.g. in van Mulders (2005) who wrote on Flemish SN. If the SN is descriptive it might carry negative connotation and can be altered later in life. It might even change from low to high esteem. A harmless example is, e.g. on hair style, length or presence or absence of a feature /hair/ is not permanent but might, however, be carried on. In the 'hair bun' example (table 1, No 18) the name bearer did not seem to mind people knowing about this piece of information from her past. In stark contrast we find the situation in China where individuals cannot change their own SN if disliked (Yau and He, 1990). Bad luck for the Chinese then because according a Chinese proverb a bad name is worse than being born to a bad life (Kaplan and Bernays, 1999: 18).

Mindess (1990: 6) in her extensive interviews on name signs concludes the following: 'One of the values that was made explicit … was that of tradition itself. … Both deaf and hearing

members of the community should be aware of the rules and traditions of names signs. …it is right to pass on the same traditional names again and again, but the two values most often expressed were name signs as *identity symbols* and name signs as *group membership.'* [My italics.] BSL shares many features with naming systems of other cultures: picking the right name, uniqueness of names, names as identity, changing one's name, and a series of names reflecting life's circumstances (ibid: 20) does occur in a number of Deaf communities around the world.

5. Conclusion

In my own small setting, as well as in conversation with deaf people, I was able to establish that the names sign system in British Sign Language is fundamentally different from the well described and researched system of American Sign Language. It is worth noting that the origin of the ANS in ASL was not natural but the result of language planning as Supalla traced it. He also states that he could not deny that the system incorporates 'limited' English as he calls it (1992: 36). Supalla only refers to the Swedish system being different and relying dominantly on DNS in his 1992 *The Book of Name Signs*. Supalla is clearly negative in his attitude towards what he calls unfortunate recent external influences of the name signing tradition.

Contrary to this then, the BSL system seems to be much more flexible, brighter in outlook and attitude and more entertaining yet as well functioning as the American one. It welcomes outsiders as long as they have friendly intentions to find out more about Deaf communities.

Name signs are a fascinating example of names in contact in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic world as I hope to have been able to demonstrate in this small study. Sign Languages offer numerous angles of interest to sociolinguistics, onomastics and beyond and further explorations are encouraged worldwide.

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